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SECURITY INFORMATION

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
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SE-23: PROSPECTS FOR A MIDDLE EAST DEFENSE ORGANIZATION
(Draft for Board Consideration)

DISCUSSION

I. PRESENT STATUS OF THE MIDDLE EAST COMMAND

1. The establishment of a Middle East Defense organization was first proposed in October 1951, when the US, the UK, France, and Turkey invited Egypt to join with them in setting up a Middle East Command (MEC). In November 1951, the sponsoring powers informed Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Israel of the principles which they would follow in the establishment of MEC. By implication these states were invited to join in the enterprise as associate members.

2. The major objective of MEC was to strengthen the defenses of the Middle East through the cooperative effort of all states interested in its defense, whether or not territorially part of the area. In particular, the sponsoring powers hoped

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that it would contribute to a compromise solution of the Anglo-Egyptian controversy. MEC would also aim to increase the defense capabilities of the Middle Eastern countries in order to permit a proportionate decrease in the peacetime role of states not territorially part of the area.

3. The Wafd government in Egypt summarily rejected the four-power proposal as an ill-disguised attempt to substitute four-power occupation of Egypt for British occupation. Public opinion among practically all politically conscious elements in Egypt approved the government's position. King Farouk and the present Hilaly government are more favorably disposed toward MEC, but even they oppose the stationing of foreign troops in Egypt and demand prior acceptance of the principle of unity of Egypt and the Sudan under the Egyptian crown.

4. Although most governmental leaders in the other Arab states have shown considerable sympathy for MEC, they have not dared to offend Egypt or back nationalist opposition to the MEC. Saudi Arabian and Lebanese leaders have been the most favorably disposed toward MEC. Iraqi leaders approve of MEC in principle, but have advocated superimposing it on the ineffective Arab Security Pact in order to make it more palatable to Arab opinion. Syrian Army leaders who now control the Syrian government have

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stated bluntly that they would be willing to participate in MEC if they received substantial military assistance from the West.

5. Although Israel has expressed its willingness to cooperate with the Western powers in building up the defenses of the Middle East against Soviet aggression, it fears that MEC would provide a means for the Arabs to strengthen their armed forces at Israel's expense. For security reasons, Israel would prefer to deal directly with the US and UK rather than with a MEC containing French, Turkish, and Arab representatives.

II. THE EFFECT OF THE ANGLO-EGYPTIAN CONTROVERSY ON THE MEC.

6. The solution of the Anglo-Egyptian controversy is essential to the establishment of an inclusive Middle East defense organization. Egypt will certainly not join until its controversy with the British is settled and no other Arab nation is likely to if Egypt does not.

7. A settlement of the Anglo-Egyptian controversy which would permit Egyptian participation in a Middle East defense organization depends entirely on British acceptance, at least in principle, of complete evacuation of British troops from Egyptian soil and on British recognition of Farouk as King of the Sudan

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as well as of Egypt. There is almost no likelihood that Egypt will reduce these demands or even accept any proposal which called for the stationing of foreign troops in Egypt.

III. PROSPECTS FOR ESTABLISHMENT OF A MIDDLE EAST DEFENSE ORGANIZATION

8. If these demands were met, however, Egypt would almost certainly be willing to cooperate with the Western powers in the establishment of a more limited Middle East defense organization than now projected under MEC. Egypt would probably object to the concept of a command structure in which the Middle East countries would of necessity have a subordinate status. It would almost certainly not permit the command headquarters to be established in Egypt and would probably refuse to cooperate under a British, French, or Turkish supreme commander. It would, however, probably support a Middle East defense organization the chief functions of which would be to: (a) coordinate operational plans; (b) arrange the terms under which the Western powers would assist the Middle East states to strengthen their forces; and (c) arrange the terms under which the Middle East states would provide the Western powers with defense facilities such as bases and communications. Egypt would probably permit British or other Western technicians to maintain the bases in the Suez Canal Zone and might cooperate in the formation of an

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international air defense force. It would insist, however, on retaining command of all ground and air bases in the country.

9. If the Anglo-Egyptian controversy is settled in such a way as to provide for Egyptian cooperation in a Middle East defense organization, the other Arab states would almost certainly follow Egypt's lead. The chief motivation in most of these countries, particularly Syria, would be the hope of obtaining substantial amounts of arms, military equipment, and economic aid from the Western powers. Another important consideration would be the desire of many Arab leaders to associate their countries more closely with the Western bloc without at the same time giving the impression that they are submitting to Western influence. Because of its multilateral character, a Middle East defense organization would be less vulnerable to Arab nationalist criticism than the present UK treaties with Iraq and Jordan, even though these countries would probably not insist on the withdrawal of British forces. Jordan's predominantly tribal society has not yet been deeply affected by the virulent nationalism which is sweeping most of the Arab states, and in Iraq extreme nationalistic elements have been kept effectively in check. The country's leaders are more aware than the Egyptians of the threat of Soviet aggression and UK-Iraqi relations have been helped by the withdrawal from Iraq of all British forces except a few RAF units and

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the return to Iraq of control of all but two airfields. Saudi Arabia would join a Middle East defense organization in order to weaken the Arab nationalist contention (to which Ibn Saud is extremely sensitive) that Saudi Arabia is a US puppet. Saudi Arabia is also fully aware of the threat of Soviet aggression. Lebanese leaders would likewise welcome establishment of a Middle East defense organization in the hope that it would lead to closer Western-Arab relations and thus relieve Lebanese governments of the necessity of supporting, because of Lebanon's dependent position within the Arab League, anti-Western policies of the other Arab states.

10. By joining in a Middle East defense organization, the Arab States would also hope to increase legitimate US participation in the affairs of the area and reduce what they consider to be undue British and French interference. Despite Arab suspicion that Israeli and Zionist pressures will influence US courses of action and that the US is committed to support the UK in its controversies with the Arab governments, there is a feeling among the people of the area that the US will generously supply arms and other aid to the Arab states without binding them by "unequal treaties" or interfering in their internal affairs. This does not mean that Egypt would accept the substitution of US for British occupation forces on its territory or that any of the Arab states

would be willing to accord to the US the type of administrative influence which the UK now exerts in Jordan and Iraq. It does, however, mean that the Arab states, generally speaking, would prefer to obtain military and economic assistance from the US than from the UK or France and would prefer to deal with US advisors. Arab cooperation in any Middle East defense organization, therefore, would be likely to increase to the extent that the organization provided a means of increasing legitimate US participation in the affairs of the region and reducing British and French influence therein.

11. Israel would continue to act cautiously with respect to a Middle East defense organization. The Israelis would certainly wish to be included in any program for arming the Middle East states and have demonstrated some interest in establishing military ties with the US and the UK. Israel's hypersensitivity on security matters, however, would probably make it unwilling to enter into any arrangement which involved furnishing military information to its Arab neighbors. Moreover, Israel is reluctant to take any overt step calculated to alienate the USSR and thus eliminate all possibility of further Jewish emigration from the Soviet bloc. If some form of Israeli association acceptable to both Israel and the Arab states is at all possible, it would of necessity involve a high degree of compartmentalization.

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IV. PROBLEMS CONFRONTING A MIDDLE EAST DEFENSE ORGANIZATION.

12. While settlement of the Anglo-Egyptian dispute would thus probably lead to the establishment of a regional defense organization capable of channelling Western military aid and advice to the Middle East states and of carrying out some preliminary defense planning and coordination, its development into a more broadly effective organization would remain an extremely difficult task.

13. Militarily, the creation of effective defenses for the Middle East would remain handicapped by the non-participation of Iran, which at present strongly opposes military ties with the West, and by the obstacles to development of a larger and more effective defense force. At least over the next year or two, it is unlikely that Arab capabilities for self-defense can be significantly improved. In the unlikely event that Commonwealth troops were made available to fill the gap, the Middle East states would almost certainly refuse to allow them to be stationed on their soil.

14. At the same time, the effectiveness of a Middle East defense organization as a mechanism for improving Middle East relations with the West would also be subject to serious handicaps. Although the evacuation of British forces from Egypt,

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by removing the chief manifestation of Western "interference" in the Arab world, would eliminate the major irritant in Arab-Western relations, Arab fears and suspicions and intraregional rivalries would remain, both to plague negotiations for actual establishment of a working organization and to provide ammunition for the extreme nationalist element in the Arab states. Public opinion, as well as many leaders, would continue to underestimate, ignore, or be fatalistic about the threat of Soviet aggression, which they would regard as far less tangible than the question of Western "interference" or the Palestine issue. Arab leaders would remain suspicious of Western motives, and would be concerned lest the defense organization be used as a means of applying collective pressure on them or reestablishing spheres of influence. Turkey's participation in the organization would do little to reduce these fears. In general, most states would remain motivated primarily by a desire to improve their military strength vis-a-vis their neighbors, and their attitude toward a regional defense organization would depend largely on the amount of military assistance which could be obtained under its aegis.